

PATCHES OF GODLIGHT

October 20, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"In the beginning God created..."

Scripture
Genesis 1:1-13
John 1:1-14

The headline caught my eye. "Russian Arts Evolve on the Brink of Dissidence... New Plays Open in Basement, Jazz echoes in Factory Halls." The article which followed described an art exhibit in the dark basement of a Moscow coffee house..."Many of the paintings were simply hung by string from steam pipes, their titles announced on typewritten scraps of paper glued to the wall." It was the first public exhibition of the work of an artist whose paintings had been seen only secretly before. What made this art so dangerous? What was there about this art which led the state to regard its exhibition, its creation by the artist as an act of political subversion? Why does the Soviet state, or any state, care what people paint, or what people look at, or read or listen to? The news article about the secret exhibit in the Moscow coffee house described the work as "bold canvasses, austere sketches, bright graphics," hardly the stuff that might motivate viewers to leave the gallery and commit high treason or gross immorality. (The New York Times, 2/5/84)

Joseph Stalin curtailed the idea of free artist expression in Soviet society. So did the early masters of the Chinese Revolution. In both instances some of the arts flourished so long as the government regarded them as appropriate. Free artistic expression, however, was judged to be inappropriate and dangerous. Yevtushenko, Solzenitsyn — are names we know because their art, their writing, earned the enmity of their government.

At the time of the Spanish Revolution, Adolph Hitler threw in on Franco's side and used the exercise to practice the new concept of saturation bombing. The first target was Guernica, the town in which Pablo Picasso was born. In profound rage and disgust the artist painted "Guernica," a brutal and powerful picture which was immediately banned by the government for its eloquent protest.

Dimitri Shostakovich, in a life-time of uneasy truce with Russian totalitarianism, was criticized and watched carefully in the 1930's for composing music which was described as "cheap, tuneless, vulgar, with bourgeois tendencies." And then he wrote his 5th Symphony, and at its preview in 1937 the audience responded with wild enthusiasm, standing and applauding for hours. Soviet critics thought it indicated his return to socialist acceptability. Other analysts now think that the audience heard something else, namely a piece of music which gathers up in its magnificent sonorities the motifs

of human dignity, human aspiration and the unrelenting reach of humanity for perfect freedom.

What is it about art that is regarded with such respect, such suspicion, such fear? Why do the arts which we, in the comfortable context of a free society regard as a gentle, harmless, liesure-time interest, pose a threat to political control? Why does totalitarianism fear the arts?

Dictators are threatened by art because art needs freedom and thrives in freedom and therefore celebrates freedom. Art sees a deeper significance in ordinary humanity in a way that points to a source of meaning which transcends ordinariness. Rembrandt's portraits of simple people are luminous, pointing to something terribly important about each of them, something invisible, mystical, spiritual. Neither Communism nor Fascism can stand that for long. In both instances, as in all totalitarianism, the state is the ultimate authority. There is no transcendent to which one can look, point, or appeal. There can be no truth, no reality other than that which the state defines and approves. Because they cannot and do not conform to that, artists threaten the very foundations of totalitarianism of any kind.

The other major source of subversion, in the context of totalitarianism, is the free and rigorous expression of religion. Poets and playwrights, prophets and priests often find themselves in jail together and sometimes only there do we begin to see the close relationship between the arts and religion.

Presbyterian Theologian Ted Gill writes: "the arts smash open the walls of our imagination and let us look out through abrupt windows -- and breathe in the larger air of an expanded universe..." Art and religion, Gill teaches, "are up to the same thing." (Sibling Rivalry, A Sermon preached at Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ, 3/1/81.)

I think of that abrupt window which allows us to see through and breathe in something of that which is larger, when Georgia O'Keefe siezes us with a bright, beckoning flower, or Gustav Mahler addresses deep interior emotions. British author C. S. Lewis pondered the wonderful fact that God seemed to do that consistently: to intrude in the mundane dailiness of his life with something of the holy. "Surprised by Joy" he called it once. Another time, reflecting on experiences of unexpected pleasure and spontaneous ecstasy he called them the light of God shining into the darkness of our lives. "Patches of Godlight" was the way he put it, a phrase I find wonderfully descriptive.

Have you seen one recently? Have you stood inside one? Have your senses been assaulted by something so good, so big, so gracious that you found your whole being responding to it? There are moments of wonderful transcendence, listening to music for instance, when humanity in all its potential and God in all his glory, seem to be in harmony, singing together: moments, when in spite of your normal reserve, the hair on your neck stands up and your heart rate increases and your eyes fill with tears. In nature...

Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists, that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that
ache and sag,
And all but cry with colour!...
Thou'st made the world too beautiful
this year." Edna St. Vincent Millay put it...

or in relationship with someone whose love for you is an absolute gift of grace. There are moments in athletics, in science, in medicine -- when our humanness is stretched to its full height, and for a moment we are caught up in something larger than any of us, something which I do not hesitate to call the glory of God himself. That's what art is, a striving to realize the enormity of our humanity, a window into the deeper significance of the ordinary, and a suggestion of that other glory, that source of hope and love and meaning we call God and who we know through the expression of his love in Jesus Christ. Thus the windows here, catching and playing with pure light, reminding us of the subtlety of its source, and graceful rosettes in stone and strong high vaults, and angels standing watch in semi-darkness which hides the color from us, but which was put there as a reminder, as a Patch of Godlight, in Lewis's idiom.

The New Testament is full of them: incidents in which the truth about God and humanity becomes incandescent. Ted Gill likes to point to that wonderful moment when a woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, is challenged by Judas for wasting money, but is affirmed by Jesus for the simple aesthetic beauty of what she had done. Of course Judas was correct. The perfume could have been sold and the poor fed. The tension itself is important. But something even more important about our humanity, and about what God wants to nurture in our humanity, is lost if the beauty of the gesture is no longer valued...Or that wonderful moment when the prodigal returns and the father, in overwhelming gratitude, can think of no better way to express himself than to order a ring for his son's finger -- an artifact, a work of art, even before the new cloak and the banquet. Gill writes: "It is there in the appreciation of the lilies that toil not nor spin. They can't be eaten, and are one of the few things left that can't be smoked. They never became win, nor were they ever spun into cloth, and since Easter hadn't happened yet, they weren't even needed for trimming the altar. Still our Lord responds in admiration and gratitude."

I did something a bit unusual this morning. I chose two scripture readings for inclusion in this service not because they appear in the lectionary for the day -- which they do not, and not for their exegetical value, although there is plenty of that, but simply because they are wonderfully artistic. The first sets out to tell about that most astounding art of all -- the creation of the world. We thought a bit last week about the misunderstanding which results when this poem is forced to serve as science. We thought about the exploding universe idea, the receding galaxies, and the electronic hissing the astronomers at Bell Labs hear on their radio telescopes, echoing the first sound at the moment of creation. We saw how astronomy and theology keep bumping into each other at a place Robert Jastrow calls "the blank wall of mystery," and what Albert Einstein termed "a singularity in time," that moment before which there were no moments.

Out of curiosity I attended a public debate one time between two antagonists who called themselves a Scientific Creationist and a Secular Humanist. I shouldn't have. The creationist argued for the literal accuracy of Genesis and seemed to know the actual year, month and day when God called order out of chaos. The humanist argued for evolution and against all religion which he assumed, with surprising ignorance, was represented by the creationist. Fortunately, his arguments were so obtuse no one knew what he was talking about. They talked past each other and the audience became bored. No one suggested that each was a little right, that God might be creative enough to use a process of evolution to get the job done. No one suggested that Genesis I is a breathtaking work of art, not a primer in science: that its point is not the "how" but the "who" and the "why" -- the truly important questions. That scriptural account is an affirmation of the most important, most revolutionary truth there is; namely that God created, that creation belongs to God, reveals God's purposes, that humankind is created in God's image, belongs to God, is accountable to God and that all life is created to live in relationship with God. That, I would submit, is singularly more important and more interesting than the relentless fuss about how long it took, when it happened, and where Cain found a wife. In fact, those arguments not only miss the point, but divert attention from the meaning and intent of the text. Genesis 1 contains truth expressed artistically. To treat it like empirical science is a little like confining your appreciation of Monet to a discussion of the chemical composition of the paint he used.

Centuries after the creation stories were written, another highly skilled writer attempted to convey what he had experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. He used something of the same poetry..."In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." In the beginning was the creative energy of God straining to be expressed. In the beginning God whose nature it is to be making things and saying things. "In the beginning was the Word" and then the most astonishing claim anybody ever made: "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth..." Some scholars believe that passage was a hymn, written to be sung, to be expressed artistically.

Religion needs art, because the deepest, most profound feelings simply cannot be squeezed into words. Faith, hope, aspiration need music and color and form for their expression. John Calvin taught that the creeds of the church should be sung, not recited, because they are more than one dimensional, academic propositions. Someone once asked the great Russian Ballerina, Pavlova, what she was trying to say in a particular dance. Her response is classic. "If I could explain it," "I wouldn't have to dance."

The time was when most art was about religious topics, paid for by the church, and displayed, played or read in connection with religious observances in religious institutions. But just as science and religion parted company for a time, so religion and art were separated at the Reformation, particularly for those of us who inhabit the Reformed/Presbyterian wing of the Reformation. In our more zealous moments we destroyed the sculpture in the cathedrals, white-washed the walls and made bonfires out of the icons. In our ardent

suspicion of the arts as too sensuous, too human, we banished the organ and the candles and even the cross as potentially idolatrous and as one modern theologian put it, turned the flesh, the word became, back into the one dimensional brittleness of the spoken word.

Just as we are reaching out and finding a new commonality with science, so there is a wonderful new spirit of accommodation and understanding emerging between religion and our brothers and sisters in the arts. It is exciting and interesting and important. The Arts Festival which begins today is important, not only for its content but also for what it says about the old and renewed relationship between us. I find that when artists recover from their initial shock that a religious institution is interested in their art, and not just pictures of religion subjects, they are intrigued and enthusiastic. Not surprisingly, many artists have a lot to say about topics that are important to us: God, love, beauty, justice. They are our sometimes unconscious allies. We are up to the same thing.

God expressed himself in the incarnation: the enfleshment of his love. Part of the Genesis claim is that he expressed that love in our creation as well. We -- you and I -- are expressions of God's creative energy. We are works of God's art, in that regard. The ancient writer saw it as an imprint in each of us of God's own image... We are the one animal in creation, Rollo May notes, who stopped on the evolutionary ladder, picked up a burnt stick and drew a picture of a bison on a cave wall. Thousands and thousands of years ago, long before we could read or write, we were laboriously and lovingly carving stone and wood into graceful shapes. And in moments of idleness, in the middle of a board meeting, we are still at it -- doodling, drawing, on our note pads, making art. Art is in us. We are defined, perhaps more accurately, as co-creators with God, co-artists, working on the same canvas, responsible for building, shaping, forming, coloring the future of the world. That is our highest and holiest vocation -- to paint, sculpt, shape and co-create with God the world we will give to those who come after us.

In a recently published scholarly commentary on Genesis, the author writes that in and through the wonderful poetry, and in and through the scientific inquiry as to how the process operated, the relationship of creator to creation has always been the issue and still is. (Walter Bruggemann, Interpretation: Genesis) The academic formulation may bore you to tears: but its personal expression comes in the crises of life and in the toughest, most urgent questions any of us will ever ask...

O God, why is this happening to me?

Is there anybody there?

O Christ, why does it hurt so much?

When I die, will anybody care?

Where am I going?

Is anyone listening?

Do I matter?

God's relationship to the creation is the crux of it for each of us and for all of us. Our oldest truth is that the creation is God's. Our most important truth is that the creator loves the creation, has become part of it in Jesus Christ, has acted in a way to make it whole, to give it peace, and love and hope. We are invited to trust that God of creation, his plan, to entrust our lives to his providence and his continuing care. And when we cannot understand, when the limits of our intellect become all too real, when we feel drawn into a skepticism and cynicism which seem like integrity, we are invited by the one who is also an artist, to stop and listen and feel and look around a bit and see the patches of Godlight we are given.

Amen

Surprise us, God of creation, with occasions of beauty today. Help us to see the beauty of your handiwork in the world around us, in the uniqueness of the people you have created and given us to love, and in our own particularity.

God, give us moments of beauty when the sights and sounds of your love are clear, bright, startling. God give us grace to praise you and to glorify you whenever and wherever you make yourself known: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.